

## A Biography of and Interview with Jack O. Walther, DVM

Class of 1963, University of California, Davis School of Veterinary Medicine  
Author and Interviewer: Donald F. Smith, *Austin O. Hooey Dean Emeritus* (Cornell)

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*Jack (John) O. Walther, 1963*

### **Dr. Jack O. Walther: AVMA President (2003-04)**

If you were to meet Dr. Walther in the halls at a veterinary conference, you would likely find him to be the most congenial, enthusiastic, well-informed and professional person you had met all day. You might also be surprised to learn that this man, who rose to the pinnacle of the veterinary world as president of the AVMA, grew up on a small ranch in rural Nevada.

As a boy of six, Jack was influenced by the pin-stripe suited veterinarian who attended to his lame Pinto mare. “*Dr. Bamberger was my hero*”, he recalls. At that time in the mid 1940s, there were only about 30 veterinarians in the entire state of Nevada to serve 40,000 horses and mules, 400,000 cattle, a half million sheep, household pets and wildlife. Like Dr. Bamberger, who graduated from the Chicago Veterinary College in 1909, about one-quarter of the state’s veterinarians were graduates of colleges that no longer exist.<sup>1</sup>

Dr. Walther continued to follow his dream of veterinary medicine. He did his undergraduate studies as an out-of-state student at the University of California, Davis, then entered the DVM program in 1959, also at Davis.

Following graduation in 1963, Dr. Walther returned to Nevada and established an equine practice in Reno. Like many other veterinary graduates of the early 1960s, Jack was drafted during the Vietnam War and spent two years in the Army Veterinary Corps, stationed at the Aberdeen Proving Ground, Maryland. Returning to Nevada after his discharge, Dr. Walther entered the companion animal field and over the next 35 years established three small animal hospitals in the Reno area.

Along with clinical practice, Dr. Walther became active in veterinary affairs at the state and national levels. In 1973, he was elected president of the State association and the following year was selected to chair the Legislative Committee and was responsible for reviewing all State legislation that involved veterinary issues. He served as chairman of the State Board of

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<sup>1</sup> Graduates of the San Francisco Veterinary College, St. Joseph’s Veterinary College (Kansas City), Kansas City Veterinary College, and George Washington University were most prominent at the time.

Veterinary Examiners for 10 years and was named Nevada's Veterinarian of the Year in 1983, one of only four veterinarians to have ever received this award.

Community development also held great appeal for Dr. Walther. He took on the small and financially-fragile Reno Rodeo and saw it become one of the top five rodeos in North America. To recognize his efforts as chairman in transforming the rodeo, he was presented with the distinctive honor of Man of the Decade, a designation that has never been repeated.



Photograph provided by Dr. Walther

*Dr. Walther plays his role as working cowboy on his ranch in Lamoille, NV in 2010.*

As a leader of the Washoe County Airport Authority, Dr. Walther promoted major expansion of passenger and commercial air service in the Reno/Sparks area. From 1997-99, he was chair of the board of the financially troubled National Championship Air Races. At the completion of the 1999 show, the Air Races were again stable and had regained prominence as a major national event. The Air Race Association named him Man of the Year in 2001.



Photograph provided by Dr. Walther

*Dr. Walther's love of aviation reached its acme in a ride in an F-16 at Nellis Air Force Base in Las Vegas (circa 2000).*

In 1992, Dr. Walther was selected as Nevada's delegate to the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA). After selling his veterinary practice in 2000, he moved to his ranch in Lamoille, NV and continued his progression through the AVMA ranks as a member of the executive board.

With a move that reflected his passion for the assisting veterinary students develop leadership potential in their future profession, he successfully ran for the position of AVMA vice president. During the first year of his two-year term, he visited over half of the veterinary colleges in the country, listening to and learning from veterinary students while sharing his philosophy and enthusiasm for the profession.

During a trip to Cornell University in September 2001 in his capacity as vice president, he received an unanticipated call from a colleague encouraging him to run for the position of AVMA president-elect. Though no previous AVMA vice president had used that position as a springboard to the presidency for almost 100 years, Dr. Walther entered the race and two years later by became the 140th president of the association for 2003-04, succeeding Dr. Joe M. Howell.

Dr. Walther was the leader of the 70,000-member AVMA<sup>2</sup> in a year in which serious diseases of food-producing animals, notably, highly pathogenic avian influenza<sup>3</sup> and bovine spongiform encephalopathy (sometimes referred to as "mad cow disease") emerged as threats to the nation's food animals and international trade.

AVMA photograph provided by Dr. Walther



In his position as national spokesperson for the profession, Dr. Walther dealt with ongoing and emerging issues of importance to wildlife and domestic livestock. In April 2004, he testified before the Senate Subcommittee on Fisheries, Wildlife and Water, encouraging the federal government to provide funding necessary to improve surveillance for Chronic Wasting Disease that threatened deer and elk populations.<sup>4</sup>

In what he considers one of his most important initiatives, Dr. Walther energized and expanded the public relations programs of the AVMA, transforming that department in ways that were long overdue. He also fundamentally improved the way in which legislative issues in various states were monitored by the AVMA so that relevant and timely information could be shared among veterinary associations in other states.

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<sup>2</sup> Approximately 86% of the active veterinarians in the U.S. were members of the AVMA at that time.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.avma.org/onlnews/javma/apr04/040401c.asp>

<sup>4</sup> [http://epw.senate.gov/hearing\\_statements.cfm?id=220174](http://epw.senate.gov/hearing_statements.cfm?id=220174)

Dr. Walther also facilitated the establishment of a privately-managed testing service for veterinary graduates of foreign and non-accredited colleges that helped reduce a two-to-three-year backlog of new veterinarians awaiting examination for licensure to practice.

In July 2004, Dr. Walther passed the president's gavel to Dr. Bonnie V. Beaver, the second woman to serve as AVMA president, and concluded his AVMA executive responsibilities as past president (2004-05).

Dr. Walther continues to be an active leader in veterinary medicine, serving on several veterinary boards, in particular the Western Veterinary Conference (WVC). His various roles with the WVC were so distinguished that the program for the 2013 annual meeting will be named in his honor (only the sixth time this has occurred in the past three decades).

Despite his enormous public and professional contributions, Dr. Walther's greatest pride is in his family and three children: J.D. (Houston, TX), Kathi (Johannesburg, South Africa) and Jim (Denver area, CO).



Photographs provided by Dr. Walther



*Dr. Jack Walther (right) with his children (L to R): J.D., Kathi and Jim.*



## Interview

Listen to the Interview

**Subject:** Jack O. Walther, DVM  
**Interviewer:** Dr. Donald F. Smith  
**Interview Date:** February 16, 2010  
**Location:** Las Vegas, NV

### Interviewer's Note:

*I first met Dr. Walther during his visit to Cornell as Vice President of the AVMA. As explained in his interview below, it was during that 2001 visit that he received a call encouraging him to relinquish the second year of that position and run for president-elect (which he won). In the course of mutual contemplation of topics ranging from cowboy poetry to veterinary policy, our friendship continued to grow over the next few years. Jack's ebullience and straight-talking nature, as well as his continued deep commitment to the future of the veterinary profession emerging in the lives of our current students, inspired me to incorporate his story in this legacy collection. (Dr. Donald F. Smith)*

*Dr. Donald Smith:*

Please describe how you became a veterinarian and how you eventually became president of the AVMA.<sup>1</sup>

*Dr. Jack Walther:*

When I was about 6 years old, I had a Pinto mare who got lame the first day of the summer every year. Dr. Bamburgh, who was a very famous equine veterinarian, would take come out and take care of my horse and I always was very, very, very impressed with him.<sup>2</sup> He would come out in a pin-striped suit and white shirt and, of course, liking the horse the way I did, he was my hero.

I think that was when I started saying, 'I'm going to be a veterinarian', and I never changed. I was fortunate enough to be able to go from high school to University of California, Davis where I did my undergraduate work even though I was an out-of-state student, then I got accepted into veterinary school.<sup>3</sup>

My other mentor, Dr. Key, had a practice in Reno.<sup>4</sup> I worked for him the summer after my freshmen year in veterinary college, and his words of wisdom were, 'If you want to be a veterinarian, come work for me for the summer and one of two things will happen: you'll either love what you're doing, or you won't and you'll want to go off and do something else.'

As far as going into organized veterinary medicine, I'd always been active in student bodies; I was president in my high school. There was a veterinarian who was a past vice president of the

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. Walther was the 140<sup>th</sup> president of the American Veterinary Medical Association in 2003-04.

<sup>2</sup> Dr. George E. Bamburgh (Chicago Veterinary College, 1909).

<sup>3</sup> Dr. Walther was a resident of Nevada.

<sup>4</sup> Dr. Joseph B. Key, KSU '39. Dr. Key left his veterinary practice in 1958, went to Law School and became a practicing attorney. As of this writing, he is 97 years old and resides in Reno.

AVMA, Dr. O'Hara, who was our state veterinarian.<sup>5</sup> And Dr. O'Hara and I got to be quite good friends and he encouraged me to get involved in the state association. He mentored me and allowed me to move into leadership positions there.

At a very young age, I was president of the state association and then was asked to go on the committee that dealt with legislation. I did that for a number of years and then ultimately had an opportunity to become a member of the board of directors of the AVMA. I was on the House of Delegates for about ten years.<sup>6</sup>

That was a time in my life when I was doing a lot of other things in Reno. I was chairman of the Airport Authority, chairman of the Air Races, chairman of the Reno Rodeo, chairman of the Visitors Authority. I was so busy doing that I got a little bit away from veterinary medicine until I had the opportunity to run for AVMA vice president.

The vice president of AVMA is a special position. You work with the schools and the veterinary students. I had taught veterinary medicine at University of Nevada. I loved working with the youngsters! I always have four or five young people in my veterinary hospitals, so it was a natural thing, a way for me to move up in the leadership of AVMA.

I was told by my very, very good friend, Jim Nave,<sup>7</sup> who was then president of AVMA, *'Jack, you realize if you become the vice president that your political days in the AVMA are over, because no vice president has become president since 1917.'* Being the vice president was a dead-end position as far as AVMA politics was concerned.

That was fine with me. I was anxious to work with the students and being AVMA president was not at all on my list. I was fortunate enough to get elected. I was very happily going from school to school and enjoying it thoroughly. One night in November, right around Thanksgiving, I got a call from one of the leaders of the AVMA saying, *'We'd like to have you run for President.'*<sup>8</sup>

Interestingly enough, that was at exactly the time I had gone to Cornell [to visit with the students]. And I remember it well. My comment was, *'I'd love to go and do that at some time but I'm vice president. When would you think I should become president?'* And he said, *'Now!'*

The fellow who thought he was going to be president [my opponent] had been campaigning for six months. Nobody had ever come into a race mid-term like that. So I had to think long and hard on whether or not I should do that. I have a brother who is an attorney— fortunately we're

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<sup>5</sup> Dr. John L. O'Hara, DVM (ISU '43); Dr. O'Hara was state veterinarian for Nevada. He was vice president of the AVMA 1963-65.

<sup>6</sup> The House of Delegates of the AVMA is comprised of one representative (and one alternate) from each state.

<sup>7</sup> Dr. James Nave DVM '68 (U Missouri); resides in Las Vegas, NV; A.V.M.A. president 2000-01.

<sup>8</sup> More specifically, he would run for office of president-elect in 2002, with the expectation that he would assume the presidency for 2003-04.

best friends— and I ran it past him. His comment was, ‘*Well, it’s an uphill battle, but it’s a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.*’

I had a lot of support, obviously, and was elected. I had to give up my vice presidency and was elected president of AVMA. So I did come in at a little different angle than most people.<sup>9</sup>

*Dr. Smith:*

When you came into the presidency—during that year—what was the biggest challenge you faced?

*Dr. Walther:*

Actually, there were two. Immediately at the veterinary convention where I was elected, there was an overwhelming concern about legislation in states that went unnoticed by the state associations and there were some things passed that were very detrimental to the profession. The hog issue in Florida was certainly one of them.

Before I left the convention after I was elected, I had put together and got approved by our board to get a task force to look into how we deal with that. Ultimately, before I was finished as president, we formed the legislative group that hired a very fine attorney who knew about legislation, to oversee all the states on a daily basis looking out for legislation that might be hurtful to our profession.

That happened really quickly. There was a huge need for it and I had a tremendous amount of support for doing that.

The other issue was the AVMA’s visibility. I felt very strongly, that the communication and marketing of AVMA was disastrous. We had one or two people doing the communication. We hadn’t made a change in philosophy of how we market the whole profession for many years.

I talked the executive board into allowing me to again put together a task force. This took a little longer. There were a lot of people in AVMA who just didn’t want to do it differently. However, I had some really, really, good people on this task force, including a couple of the staff members who could see the writing on the wall that we needed to change.

Before my term was up, we brought that before the executive board and it was passed. And we went from two people doing communication to over 30 currently (2010). And it just totally turned around the ability of the AVMA to do a job that was primary as far as I was concerned. That’s why we’re there: to protect our profession but also to tell people what our profession is all about.

Those two initiatives were definitely the most important initiatives during my presidency, up to a point. There’s a third initiative that came late, real late. I wasn’t aware of it, and became aware of it totally by accident. The program that AVMA is responsible for testing foreign graduates who want to get licensed in the United States, was going to go away because we didn’t have enough testing capacity.

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<sup>9</sup> The vice presidency

A graduate of Ross University who wanted to take the test to get licensed had to wait three years. These youngsters were coming out of school with \$150-\$200,000 of debt and they couldn't go to work in the States. By coincidence, I happened to be president of Western Veterinary Conference<sup>10</sup> at the same time that I was president of the AVMA. The board at Western was looking into building a facility to help with their continuing education.

It was very obvious to me and to some other people that we could meld AVMA and Western and build a facility where we could give the test once or twice a month rather than once or twice a year and get away with this backlog taken care of before the whole program fell apart. I shepherded that along and with a lot of good help, and some funding from both AVMA and Western, we were able quite quickly to do away with the backlog.<sup>11</sup>

That program is still in effect so if you graduate from Ross<sup>12</sup> or Grenada<sup>13</sup> or a foreign school, you should be able to take the test within two or three months. [These two DVM programs are now accredited by the AVMA; see footnotes 12 and 13].

*Dr. Smith:*

What was left undone? What did you find that you left for your successors to do as their challenges?

*Dr. Walther:*

The one that I didn't have time to finish was the foundation [American Veterinary Medical Foundation]. It was losing money and was spending 90% of their money on their costs. As you probably know, anytime you get over 20% of donated money that that ends up in somebody's pocket, you're in trouble. I definitely got that started. Over the next couple of years, other people got the foundation back up and healthy. But it was in deep trouble.

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<sup>10</sup> Western Veterinary Conference is a private corporation that provides continuing education for veterinarians and veterinary technicians. Its first meeting was held in 1928 and has evolved since then into one of the largest and most comprehensive veterinary continuing education programs in the world. Its annual meetings are held in Las Vegas in February.

<sup>11</sup> The Oquendo Center for Clinical Education opened in Las Vegas in 2008.

<sup>12</sup> Ross University, providing veterinary education on the island of St Kitts, was accredited by the AVMA in 2011, so the program is no longer necessary for graduates of this university.

<sup>13</sup> St. George's University, providing veterinary education on the island of Grenada; similarly, St. George's is also accredited (2011).